

Information Sheet – Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*)

Sweetgum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) is a fast growing, large shade tree native to bottomland areas of the City of Alexandria. This tree, recognizable by the combination of its five-pointed, star-shaped leaves and its hard, spiked fruits, is often a prized specimen tree in parks and home landscapes. The twigs of this tree feature corky, “wing-like” growths that provide visual interest in the winter.

Sweetgum typically grows to a height of 75 feet but can grow as tall as 130 feet. Its leaves turn a colorful purple and red in the fall. **It requires a full-sun setting as it is somewhat shade intolerant.**

The seeds of this tree are an important food for a number of wildlife species, to include goldfinches, purple finches, mallard ducks, bobwhite quails, Carolina chickadees, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, white-throated sparrows, towhees, Carolina wrens, squirrels, and chipmunks. This handsome native tree serves as a larval host to a number of butterfly and moth caterpillars, to include those of the beautiful Luna and Prometheus Moths.

Care of your tree:

It is important to get your tree off to a good start by planting it properly in accordance with the instructions on the reverses of this sheet. After planting, use organic mulch to maintain a grass and weed-free area around the base of the young tree. Pine bark and pine needle mulches are very good, straight wood mulch is not. Avoid the use of non-organic mulches, which can cause the soil around the tree to stay excessively wet. Also avoid the use of black plastic or fabric weed barrier in landscape beds or borders, which may interfere with air exchange into and out of the root system through the soil and contribute to surface rooting.

It is also important to pay careful attention to the proper watering of your tree. Give your tree three to five gallons of water at planting time, and again the following day to thoroughly settle the soil and eliminate large air pockets. Water newly planted trees every other day for the first two weeks after planting. After the first two weeks, continue watering once a week during the first three years if there has not been an inch of rain during the preceding week. Watering is not required during the winter months unless the weather is particularly dry. **Please note that watering deeply once a week rather than watering lightly multiple times a week is important to the survival and health of your tree, as it encourages the tree to grow deeper roots and become a more drought-resistant tree once established.**

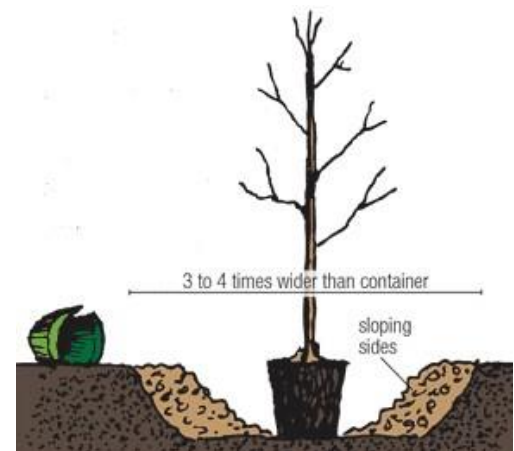
You should also be sure to avoid lawn mower and string trimmer (“weed whacker”) damage to the base of your tree, as this bark damage stresses the tree and makes it more vulnerable to insect and disease attack. Extensive string trimmer damage can cause a loss of vigor, decline, or even death, as cutting through the phloem or xylem right underneath the protective bark can disrupt the flow of water, nutrients, and sugars throughout the tree.

Another task you will need to do as your tree grows is “limb it up,” or progressively cut off lower limbs while they are still small (under 2 inches in diameter) that are at a height you will not want big limbs at when the tree is more mature. It is not recommended that you do heavy pruning when you first plant your tree, but rather after the first year or so the tree is in the ground, and each year take off a few of the lower branches. Please note that pruning trees incorrectly is harmful to the tree and increases its chance of failure, so either follow the guidelines in the U.S. Forest Service guide found at the following link: (http://na.fs.fed.us/pubs/uf/tom/090202_tom_lr.pdf), or contact TreeStewards of Arlington and Alexandria at info@treestewards.com and a TreeSteward will be more than happy to talk to you about how to prune your young tree.



Planting Instructions:

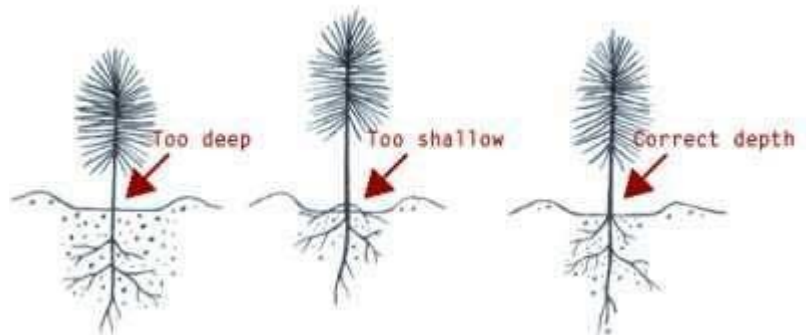
1. Dig a hole 3 to 4 times wider than the container. The hole should have sloping sides like a saucer to allow for proper root growth. The depth of the hole should be the same as the height of the rootball.
2. Lay the tree on its side and carefully remove the tree from the container, keeping the soil around the roots intact. It helps to tap the outside of the container.



3. If the root ball comes out of the pot as a solid mass and roots appear to be “circling”, score them with a sharp tool. Cut an X across the bottom of the root ball and four vertical slices along the sides about 1 inch deep. Gently work some of these roots loose. Do not let the roots dry out. Roots should be relatively loose so they can grow quickly into the surrounding soil. Look for and carefully prune away roots that cross over the main trunk or are growing in the ‘wrong direction’. If the roots are not circling and the tree comes out of the pot with loose soil, plant the tree as is taking care if possible to help spread the roots out in the planting hole.



4. Set the tree in the middle of the hole. **Avoid planting the tree too deep. See picture below for correct planting depth. The goal is to position the root flare (at the base of the trunk) just above ground level.**



5. Using some soil, secure the tree in a straight position, then fill and firmly pack the hole with original soil using a shovel and your hands. Do not use your feet- this overly compacts the soil.

6. Mulch your tree for at least the first 3 years it is in the ground. Place the mulch at a 3 to 4 inch depth in a three foot diameter around the root zone. Pine bark or pine needle mulches are a good choice. Avoid wood mulch and dyed mulches. **Do not pile up the mulch around the base of the tree (like a mountain or “mulch volcano”). This practice, although commonly done by commercial landscape companies, is very harmful for the tree and can cause disease, root, and trunk problems. This unfortunate practice of “volcano mulching,” though common, is **NOT** good for the tree.**

